

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

University writing programs deliver, so let's turn the page

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Writing programs don't just produce strong writers, they produce critical thinkers with strong skills for the workplace. mpclemens/Flickr

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Whether creative writing can be taught is a question that has been debated on and off for decades. Are writers born, is the question, or can they be made? Neither side of the debate has offered incontrovertible evidence for either position.

Those who believe writing cannot be taught tend to rely on outmoded Romantic ideas about creative genius to bolster their argument. Creativity and literary skill, they argue, are aspects of the writer's character or personality —mysterious and ineffable. Therefore they cannot be taught, but only honed and refined through experience.

This side of the debate has evolved into a critique of the value of the creative writing programs offered by universities. Some, such as Horace Engdahl, one of the current judges for the Nobel Prize for Literature, go so far as to claim that creative writing courses are killing western literature.

Ironically, a number of those who claim that writing courses damage literature are themselves teachers in creative writing programs, such as Hanif Kureishi and Will Self. Both should have a better understanding of the evidence behind the value of their own programs; or, at very least, why they are part of this enterprise. Much of the criticism has occurred in opinion pieces, with little or no evidence to support the authors' claims.

Those who have publicly come to the defence of university writing programs, though often making well-reasoned arguments, have also largely done so in opinion pieces, with similarly little reference to evidence.

Writing graduates and professional skills

The evidence about the value of creative writing programs is mounting, and it is becoming clear that writing programs are not only good for writers but for literary culture and society as a whole.

There is ample evidence, for example, that the quality of writers' practice relies not on their inherent talent, but on their environment or education.

Better writers are indeed, as Engdahl insists, connected to their communities – but they are also trained in how to make creative work out of that social engagement.

In a series of meta-studies, professor of psychology and education R. Keith Sawyer shows that creativity and artistic ability are not inherent traits but skills: learned, and then developed through experience. Sawyer also demonstrates that most successful writers are outward-looking and socially engaged, and have the highly developed domain-specific knowledge that is crucial to developing writing ability. The combination of this knowledge and social engagement is precisely what university writing programs impart.

Creative writing students acquire more than domain-specific knowledge. They also develop graduate attributes: critical thinking, critical reading, research skills and high-level verbal and written communication skills.

As well as these transferable skills, they acquire professional skills associated with writing, such as knowledge of ethical practice, creative thinking and problem solving, as well as valuable editing and publishing skills. These attributes and skills ensure that creative writing graduates are employed in a wide range of careers.

They also contribute to student satisfaction, as a recent study by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) shows: writing graduates surveyed from across Australia and New Zealand focused positively on the discipline knowledge, ethical understanding and intellectual rigour they developed as a result of their studies.

Obviously any writing program should also prepare students to achieve publication in both creative and scholarly fields. A 2010 AAWP study identified some 260 book-length publications by graduates of university creative writing programs. Recent graduates including Brooke Davis, Jessie Cole, Jesse Blackadder, Peter Mitchell, Tom Cho, Zacharay Jane, Hannah Kent, Jacqueline Wright, Sally Breen and Martin Chatterton have achieved both critical and popular reception for their creative writing.

Other graduates of writing programs have developed successful writing and creative careers across other media and publishing platforms: these include writer and commentator Benjamin Law, musician and comedian Justin Heazlewood (the Bedroom Philosopher), or editor, blogger and reviewer Angela Meyer.

Writing programs and society

Studying certainly benefits the individual students whose efforts result in their acquiring both a body of skills and the means to build a writing career – but it has much broader benefits. The societal gain from education is clearly evident for courses whose graduates emerge with the capacity to treat cancer, deal with international law, or understand macroeconomics.

But it is also evident for graduates of the Humanities and Arts — the disciplinary home for creative writing. Chief Scientist Ian Chubb says as much in his introduction to the just-published report, *Mapping the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia*:

Across STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics] and HASS [Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences], we need imagination, creative thinking and learning from what the rest of the world is doing. And we need to do it all on a scale that we have never achieved — and perhaps never bothered with - before.

This is where the formal study of creative writing comes into its own, because it provides techniques for, and guided practice in, imagination and creative thinking.

Creative writing is a way of testing and critiquing the truths of society, and is perhaps the only artform that does so because writing involves the push and pull of ideas made into sentences, and hence generates critical thinking. The study of creative writing provides opportunities to build resilience and persistence (since most creative projects don't work, or don't work as well as you want, or don't work for the first dozen drafts).

It also helps graduates to build the cognitive capacities necessary to articulate what literary critic N. Katherine Hayles has called the “deep structures of order” that allow us to live in a universe that is full of noise and full of chaos.

Many of the graduates, as well as academics employed within creative writing programs (who are themselves, in many cases, alumni of these programs), make contributions to broader literary culture and intellectual life.

Some of those most visible to the general public are their work in reviewing books in newspapers and magazines; organising writers' festivals, writers' centres and other literary-focused events or institutions; or both writing for and editing community publications — often on a voluntary basis.

They also conduct research into historical and contemporary literature; the production of meaning in the act of reading; the publication, distribution and marketing processes associated with books; and various aspects of the practice of writing itself, to name just a few research topics. This research makes an intellectual, social and economic contribution that is difficult to quantify.

Turning a light on writing and writers

Finally, and very importantly for their students, colleagues and peer writers, members of creative writing programs also act as advocates for other writers, both inside the academy and beyond it.

Students of these programs are trained lovers of reading, and it could be suggested that — at a time when literary culture, books, publishing and reading itself are seen to be under threat — this is one of the most significant benefits writing programs offer.

As cultural critic John Berger wrote in 1984:

that a poem may use the same words as a Company Report means no more than the fact that a lighthouse and a prison cell may be built with stones from the same quarry, joined with the same mortar.

While all graduates should be able to use such bricks and mortar to address important issues, graduates of creative writing programs are trained to use this primary material to move beyond reportage or argument, and to illuminate these issues in captivating and unexpected ways.



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